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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether children learn phonic decoding skills by reading without direct phonic instruction; compared the effects of a whole language first grade reading program with the effects of a traditional basal reading program; and determined whether there was a difference in decoding and comprehending abilities across levels of ability. Subjects, an experimental group of 33 low socioeconomic first grade students in two classrooms who completed the year-long program and a control group of 33 low socioeconomic students in two other elementary schools matched by sex and reading readiness, completed a Nonsense Word Test to assess decoding ability and a Deletion test to assess their ability to comprehend increasingly more difficult prose. The control group used the Scott Foresman Basal Series. Testing occurred upon completion of the school year. Comparison of the test results indicated that: (1) students in the whole language classrooms scored as well in decoding ability as those students who received direct phonics instruction; (2) as a group, students in the whole language classrooms scored higher on the Deletion Test than the control group (indicating greater comprehension of increasingly difficult prose); although (3) subjects scoring in the middle and lowest on a reading readiness test accounted for much of the difference in the overall difference in the mean scores on the Deletion Test. Findings suggest support for the whole language approach. (RS)

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A Comparison of the Whole Language Approach with a Basal Reader Approach on the Decoding and Comprehending Ability of Beginning Readers.

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Although the whole language approach appears to be gaining favor in North America, its growth has been sparked by personal testimony more than by actual research conducted in whole language classrooms. Even though it can be said that learning and language theories support the whole language approach, theoretical support alone is not sufficient to justify large scale commitments to an educational practice (Gunderson and Shapiro, 1988).

Even though there are some studies which tend to support the whole language approach (DeFord, 1981; Doake, 1980; Freeman and Freeman, 1987; Ribowsky, 1985; Wilucki, 1984), there appears to be a dearth of studies comparing the whole language approach to the basal reader approach to beginning reading. One reason for the paucity of research on whole language is that there appears to be some disagreement as to the basic components of a whole language program. Another reason is that whole language is relatively new to the United States.

PURPOSE

One of the assumptions upon which whole language is based is that one learns to read by reading and improvement in reading comes as a result of reading. It is further assumed that the phonic decoding skills which are actually necessary for fluent reading are learned by reading. (Smith, 1988; Weaver, 1988).

Accordingly, one purpose for this study was to determine whether children do learn phonic decoding skills by reading without direct phonics instruction as some believe. A second purpose for this study was to compare the effects of a whole language first grade reading program with the effects of traditional basal reader program on the children's ability to comprehend print. A third purpose was to determine whether there was a difference in the decoding and comprehending abilities of the subjects across levels of ability.

METHOD

The population was the children in eight first grade classrooms in three low socioeconomic elementary schools in which eighty five to eighty nine percent

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of the children qualified for free and reduced lunches. The experimental subjects were those 33 children who remained in the two whole language classrooms the entire school year. Although 49 children started the school year in the two experimental classrooms, only 33 of the 49 were enrolled when the data were collected the last week of May.

Since the experimental treatment was conducted in the two first grade classrooms at one of the elementary schools and the control treatment was conducted in the six first grade classrooms at the other two schools, the random assignment of children was not possible. However, at the beginning of the school year, the first grade children throughout the district were administered a Reading Readiness Test(RRT) published by Scott, Foresman and Company (1987). This made it possible to conduct a matched-pair design study.

The control subjects were identified by searching the records of the six control classrooms to find children who could be matched on sex and their score on the RRT. It was possible to match the 33 experimental subjects by accepting an RRT score within plus or minus three points. The mean score attained on the RRT was 53.76 for the experimental subjects and 54.70 for the control subjects.

During the last week of May, the 33 children who remained in the experimental classrooms the entire year and the 33 matched children in the control group were administered a Nonsense Word Test(NWT) to assess their decoding ability and a Deletion Test(DT) to assess their ability to comprehend increasingly more difficult prose. A two tailed t-test for matched-pairs was used to analyze the data. In addition to the mean scores attained by each of the experimental and control subjects on the two tests, the mean scores at three levels of ability as measured by the RRT were also compared.

TREATMENTS

Although daily schedules varied, observation and teacher interviews revealed that the amount of time devoted to reading and the other language arts averaged very close to the same in the experimental and control classrooms.

Control Treatment

The approach used with the control group was what Itzkoff (1986) refers to as the word-centered skills approach. The focus of this type of program is on enabling the readers to get meaning from print by increasing the words the students are able to recognize immediately and providing them with the skills to unlock unfamiliar words.

The control treatment was based mainly on the scope and sequence of the Scott-Foresman and Company Basal Series (1987). Although other trade books were available and used in the control classrooms, most of the instruction involved the use of the basal readers and the accompanying workbooks.

As with most basal reader programs, the vocabulary is controlled in such a way that the vocabulary is increased gradually and word recognitional skills are taught in a planned sequence. Although the adopted basal program integrated reading and writing, it appeared that nearly all of the reading and writing activities centered around the basal program. The chapter I supplemental remedial program for which many of the control subjects qualified, was also the word-centered skills approach.

Experimental Treatment

The treatment the experimental group received was the whole language approach both in the classrooms and in the Chapter I remedial program for which many of the children qualified. The program the children in the two whole language classrooms received was based on the assumption that one learns to read by reading and improvement in reading ability comes as a result of reading. It was further assumed that all skills, at least those necessary for fluent reading, are learned by reading.

In practice, the experimental treatment differed in the following ways. First, there was no systematic teaching of decoding skills in the two experimental classrooms. Second, there were no basal readers or any other controlled vocabulary materials used. The books used in the experimental classroom were the types of books Tompkins and Webeler (1983) refer to as predictable books. These are books which are easy to read because they have a repetitive language pattern, cumulative story events or a rhyming pattern. Third, there were no workbooks, skills sheets used or periodic skills assessments. Fourth, in the experimental classrooms, there was a much greater emphasis on reading to the children and getting the children where they could follow print as it was being read to them.

TESTING PROCEDURES

During the last week in May of the school year, the 33 experimental subjects and the 33 matched-pair control subjects were administered individually a NWT to assess decoding ability and a DT to assess the subjects' ability to comprehend increasingly more difficult prose.

After rapport was established, the children were directed by the examiner to the nonsense words at the lower part of the NWT so they could practice the task. After the children had practiced the sample nonsense words, they were directed to pronounce the nonsense words as though they were real words. The subjects were continued until they responded incorrectly on five consecutive nonsense words. To assess comprehending ability, the children were administered individually a demonstration test which was used to prepare the subjects to respond to the items on the DT. On each of the items, the examiner read each of the four words from which the subject was to select the word which would make sense in the deletion. Below is an example of the items:

We go to bed at night and get up in the _____.

walk morning yard street

The test was designed to have the items written in increasingly more difficult prose. The testing continued until the subject responded incorrectly or failed to respond to five consecutive items.

RESULTS

An analysis of the data revealed the following:

1. The correlation between the RRT and the DT was a positive r = .65.

2. The experimental subjects attained a mean score of 4.45 and the control group attained a mean score of 4.15 on the NWT. This difference (t=1.09) was not significant. A comparison of the eleven matched pairs at three ability levels did not produce any significant differences.

3. The mean score attained by the experimental subjects and control subjects on the DT was 11.51 and 8.21 respectively. A t-test for matched-pairs was significant at the .01 level of confidence (t=9.38).

4. Using a treatment by level design, the 11 experimental and control subjects scoring the highest on the RRT were compared as well as the 11 pairs scoring in the middle and the 11 pairs scoring the lowest on the RRT. A comparison of the top 11 subjects scoring the highest on the RRT in each group was not significant (t=0.14). A comparison of the 11 subjects scoring in the middle on the RRT revealed that the experimental subjects scored a significantly higher mean score on the DT than did the control subjects on the DT (t=2.25, P<.05). There was no significant difference in the mean scores on the DT by the 11 subjects in each group scoring the lowest on the RRT (t=2.16, P < .056).

Conclusions and Discussion

The correlation between the RRT given at the beginning of the school year and the DT given at the end of the school year was a significant r = .65. A correlation this high would seem to justify the use of the RT to formulate matched-pairs.

There was no significant difference between the mean scores attained by the experimental subjects and the control subjects on the NWT used to assess decoding ability. The fact that the experimental group which received the whole language approach scored as well as the control group which received more extensive and intensive phonic decoding instruction tends to support the view of many authorities in the field who believe the decoding skills which are actually used in reading are learned by reading (Goodman 1986, Smith 1988, Weaver 1988).

As a group, the subjects in the experimental group attained a significantly higher mean score on the DT used to assess the students' ability to comprehend prose of increasing difficulty (t=9.379, P<.01) than did the control group. This is consistent with recent research comparing whole language beginning reading programs with word-centered skills based programs

(DeFord, 1981; Freeman and Freeman, 1987; Gunderson and Shapiro, 1986; Ribowsky, 1985).

Using a treatment by level design, the mean score attained by the 11 students in each of the two groups scoring the highest on the RT, the 11 students in each group scoring next highest and the 11 students scoring the lowest on the Reading Readiness Test were compared. This comparison revealed that the 11 experimental subjects in the middle group scored significantly higher on the DT than did the middle group of 11 control subjects. However, there was no significant difference in the mean scores attained by either the top 11 or the 11 scoring the lowest on the RRT. However, it should be noted that a comparison of the mean scores attained by the 11 subjects scoring the lowest in each group on the RRT produced a difference in the mean scores on the DT in favor of the experimental group that was very close to being significant ($t=2.158$, $P<.056$)

The results of this study tend to support a whole language approach. However, it should be kept in mind that it was a very low socioeconomic population from which the subjects were selected. It should be further noted that the subjects scoring in the middle and the lowest on the RRT accounted for much of the difference in the overall difference in the mean scores on the DT used to measure the subjects' ability to comprehend prose.

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